Energy Facility Contractors Group (EFCOG)

Safety Culture Task Team

White Paper

Safety Culture Teleworking Experiences and Best Practices

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SUMMARY

This document captures teleworking practices put in place by various contractors across the Department of Energy (DOE) Complex primarily as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

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PURPOSE

The intent of this white paper is to capture teleworking practices put in place by various contractors across the DOE Complex primarily because of the COVID-19 pandemic. This paper documents successes, shares valuable approaches, and identifies efforts worth continuing in a non-pandemic state. Where appropriate, teleworking practices and methodologies that demonstrate the safety culture behavioral elements encapsulated in Attachment 10 of the DOE G 450.4-1C (2011) Integrated Safety Management System Guide are noted.

SCOPE

In late March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic surfaced. It challenged the world, altering how we live, work, and socialize. To continue to conduct mission-critical work, the DOE and its contractors had to shift, seemingly overnight, to a modified workplace landscape that incorporated a virtual environment. The lessons learned from that experience identified new opportunities for organizational efficiencies that have extended far beyond the pandemic situation that initiated them. A paradigm shift occurred in how safe work is conducted and has become the 'new normal.' This white paper highlights how several DOE sites applied and sustained a healthy safety culture amid this transition into a new, more permanent teleworking posture.

By describing the teleworking and virtual work practices enacted by almost a dozen DOE contractor sites over the course of the pandemic, this white paper serves to document successes, share valuable approaches, and identify efforts worth continuing in a non-pandemic state. Some of the initiatives presented here were embraced by most sites; other examples represent innovative approaches by a single site that yielded notable success. It is noteworthy that the practices and approaches discussed here embody the safety culture behavioral elements encapsulated in Attachment 10, Safety Culture Focus Areas and Associated Attributes, of DOE G 450.4-1C (2011): Leadership, Employee/Worker Engagement, and Organizational Learning. As such, the relevant safety culture focus areas are discussed where they most prominently align.

NARRATIVE

Sites shared their experiences of conducting work during the pandemic and migration to telework and virtual posture. Their feedback was captured and consolidated within this white paper into the following strategies and tools that highlight a variety of ways in which sites sustained and advanced their safety culture despite the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Management Leadership Established the Need for Telework and Telework Policies

The participating DOE sites reported numerous examples of their management leadership paving the way for operational success with the introduction and enhancement of virtual and telecommuter options. Actions and decisions of leadership (managers, HR, influencers of safety culture) created and enabled effective telework options through a variety of mechanisms. The workforce demonstrated their adaptability to perform work under such new options. Sites dynamically responded to the crisis, learning and evolving as the pandemic situation unfolded.

The pandemic was the impetus many sites needed to telework on a large scale. Some sites initiated temporary options, developing pilot programs and 'situational telework' criteria, to determine long-term feasibility of a new operational framework that leverages the sustained use of off-site teleworking. Factors considered included the nature of the employee's work and the potential for the job function to be safely, effectively, efficiently, and compliantly performed off-site. Programs were enacted to provide personnel with essential equipment and standard office supplies for participants to successfully work from their

telework location. Training programs were established to prepare both participants and their managers for these new options.

Many sites established policies to allow for work-from-home options. Some sites procured leased spaces as satellite offices that allowed employees to social distance to prevent viral spread and provide consistent internet and network services. Office spaces were also used for meetings, events, conferences, and teleworking (including both personal offices and co-working spaces).

Leadership found that these new approaches to off-site and remote working supported mission needs, enhanced recruitment and retention in a difficult hiring environment and maintained strong productivity. These initiatives support the DOE G 450.4-1C Attachment 10 Attributes *Leadership: Demonstrated safety leadership, Risk-informed, conservative decision making, Clear expectations and accountability, Staff recruitment, selection, retention, and development, and Open Communication and fostering an environment free from retribution*; *Employee Engagement: Personal commitment to everyone's safety, Teamwork and mutual respect, and Participation in work planning and improvement.*

Tools and Resources for Communication and Engagement

The pandemic reduced normal channels for employees to be engaged and engage others in planning and executing work. Organizations enacted program and initiatives such as Microsoft Teams and WebEx to communicate and create interactive opportunities within the virtual realm. Employees reciprocated by assisting in the development of those programs and adopting these new methods and tools for effective communication and information sharing. Building trust, fostering a questioning attitude, and employee engagement within the work environment have never been more vital or more difficult with the adoption of a virtual or teleworking posture. Many DOE sites have been able to establish and advance their organization's capacity for engagement despite these challenges. These initiatives encouraged employees to be productive and thrive, despite the changing work environment.

- *Virtual Meeting Tools and Approved Enhanced Information Technology (IT) Equipment and Applications*
  Across the DOE complex, there were many examples of the cooperative effort between management and DOE to promptly approve the expanded use of collaborative tools such as webcams, MobiKeys, iPads, laptops, CITRIX, Virtual Private Network (VPN), Skype for Business, Microsoft Teams, WebEx, and Blue Jeans.

- *Frequent and Recurring Meetings Between Managers and Staff*
  Frequent and recurring meetings between managers and their staff, both individually and with work groups, have been a key factor in ensuring that personnel remain connected, informed, and engaged. A number of sites reported high use of audio and video conferencing technologies for one-on-one and group meetings. Scheduled periodic check-ins provided opportunities for accounting of work activity(ies) to ensure staff were productive and to identify and address potential issues early. Such check-ins informed managers and supervisors early on of who was lacking audio and visual capabilities, and triggered action to remedy such gaps.

- *Interactive Media Technologies*
  Interactive media technologies have proven useful and productive for sharing information. Meetings and webinars have embraced the chat function, allowing participants to raise questions, share information, and connect in a real-time fashion. Frequently, facilitators have used those chats to compile feedback and questions, then respond immediately or within a rapid (less than two weeks) turnaround. This is not only indicative of a responsive organization, but also it garners

attention from those who realize the meeting is not just to hear a lecture, but to interact in a very real and tangible way.

- *Communication Campaigns and Centralization of Resources*
  Centralizing resources for easy retrieval by employees was a key objective for many sites. Important teleworking information was made easily accessible for the workforce using platforms like SharePoint. Some sites gave site-wide updates weekly or on a more frequent basis, via primary communication tools (daily news email distributions) to keep people aware of revised telework policies and clarity on expectations as the pandemic situation evolved. Others issued standalone safety communications, such as company-wide "Safety Flashes" to disseminate key information, particularly to raise awareness of lessons learned when there were safety events. Flexibility in communication ensured many sites flowed down information to work groups in the most efficient and effective methods for that department.

  Communication campaigns and resources also focused on ergonomics and home office wellness. Adaptive strategies and innovative ways to disseminate information/learnings were used to encourage home office improvements and to reduce the potential for injuries that can result from poor posture or inappropriate workstation setups.

Leadership and employees found that these new approaches to communication fostered more employee engagement and connection to management, the workplace, and work process during teleworking and virtual work practices. These methods support the DOE G 450.4-1C Attachment 10 Attributes **Leadership:** *Clear expectations and accountability, Management time in the field, and Open Communication and fostering an environment free from retribution*; **Employee Engagement**: *Personal commitment to everyone's safety, Teamwork and mutual respect, Participation in work planning and improvement; and* **Organizational Learning:** *Performance monitoring through multiple means and Questioning attitude.*

Innovative Use of Websites to Support Teleworking

- *Ergonomics and Outfitting the Remote/Home Office Support*
  Several sites established websites to provide guidance to employees on ergonomics-related resources and equipment, as well as address frequently asked questions (FAQs). The web-based resources covered a plethora of home ergonomic evaluation services, such as: assistance with obtaining various work station equipment from the organization (e.g., sit/stand desks, ergonomic keyboards, standing mats, footrests, and monitors to prevent laptop head tilt strain); guidance on how to purchase additional equipment or services not provided by the organization (e.g., chair repair and prescription safety/computer glasses); and educational material on how to minimize or prevent repetitive motion injuries.

- *Equipment Tutorials*
  Some site websites provided specific instructions on their web-based platforms for arranging the workstation, with advice on selecting appropriate chairs, desks, and computer equipment based on size, shape, functioning, and adjustment capabilities, as well as the individual's own unique physical characteristics.

- *IT, Security, and Miscellaneous Support*
  Online resources offered guidance on the process for seeking telecommuter status, IT and security information for remote offices, reserving a touchdown space, and training opportunities for both telecommuters and their managers. Sites offered these resources through a variety of approaches,

including webinars (real-time and a library of topical options), virtual training sessions, web-based posters disseminated via email distribution lists, and virtual safety briefings.

Leadership and employees found that use of innovative websites increased communication and fostered more employee engagement with the workplace, work processes, and hazard mitigations during teleworking and virtual work practices. These methods support the DOE G 450.4-1C Attachment 10 Attributes *Leadership: Demonstrated safety leadership and Risk-informed, conservative decision making*; *Employee Engagement: Personal commitment to everyone's safety, Teamwork and mutual respect, Mindful of hazards and controls, and Participation in work planning and improvement; and Organizational Learning: Credibility, trust and reporting errors and problems, Effective resolution of reported problems, Performance monitoring through multiple means, Questioning attitude, and Use of operational experience.*

Virtual Workstation Assessments

Most of the sites reported offering assistance from ergonomic professionals via a virtual ergonomic assessment of the employee's remote office workstation. Some virtual assessments were initiated with completion of a questionnaire form and submission of photos of the current remote office setup. Ergonomic professionals then reviewed the information, made recommendations, and sometimes approved the purchase of various ergonomic office equipment items. Other ergonomic assessments were conducted via telephone, while some took advantage of the virtual teleconference software for real-time assessments of the employees at their workstation to determine needed equipment and postural adjustments. Some sites expanded their ergonomic self-assessment tools to cover a broader range of issues including but not limited to general safety, fire safety, electrical safety, and security.

Many sites were proactive when teleworking was initiated and encouraged good ergonomics by offering to supply workstation equipment on condition of the employee's completion of an ergonomic assessment of their remote office location. Thousands of laptops were issued for use while telecommuting; some sites pre-emptively loaded ergonomic software onto those devices so that the employees would immediately be given ergonomic information, instruction, and feedback to achieve good posture, take mini-breaks, and ultimately reduce the likelihood of ergo-related injuries. Organizations also established equipment lending programs, tracking property supplied for remote office locations to ensure resources are appropriately managed and allocated.

Leadership, employees, and health and safety staff found that these new methods to virtual workstation assessments fostered employee engagement and connection to the health and safety staff as well as the tools to support a proper remote office setup. These innovative methods support the DOE G 450.4-1C Attachment 10 Attributes *Leadership: Demonstrated safety leadership and Risk-informed, conservative decision making*; *Employee Engagement: Personal commitment to everyone's safety, Teamwork and mutual respect, Mindful of hazards and controls, and Participation in work planning and improvement; and Organizational Learning: Credibility, trust and reporting errors and problems, Effective resolution of reported problems, Performance monitoring through multiple means, Questioning attitude, and Use of operational experience.*

Strategies for Strengthening Workforce Mental and Physical Well-being

- *Innovative Strategies for the Organization*
  Multiple sites placed significant focus on wellness resiliency. Many employees found themselves working out of make-shift home offices, balancing children who required home-schooling, and restricted from participating in activities likely to reduce stress (social gatherings, visits with family, travel, and vacation). Sites recognized the immense strain this placed on its staff and put in place numerous programs and initiatives to help individuals not only survive but also thrive during

the pandemic. Many sites redesigned delivery of occupational health and wellness and enhanced their programs via virtual platforms. The success of these programs has resulted in more permanent wellness resiliency programs.

Some sites redesigned delivery of occupational health and wellness and enhanced their programs via virtual platforms. Telehealth, in lieu of in-person appointments allowed individuals access to medical personnel within the safe setting of their home.

Innovative virtual fitness classes of all varieties were offered: aerobics, stretching, weightlifting, yoga, and Thai chi. Sites increased their virtual cadre of mindfulness, meditation, stress management, and nutritional course offerings. Webinars (single session and multi-session options) were offered on thriving and mobility/stretching to counter the constant sitting that often occurs at home offices, as employees do not get up to collaborate with nearby colleagues. Sites reported campaigns for mental and physical health, with thematic topics, virtual guest speakers, and incentives to attend, such as earning points towards Health Reimbursement Accounts.

- *Innovative Strategies for the Individual*
  In these trying times, sites put attention on the individual and the need for each person to seek out and achieve personal improvement, growth, and wellness. One site provided Annual Personal Safety Action Plans to all employees. These individuals were encouraged to complete their individualized safety plan and post it in their workspace, whether they were teleworking or on-site, as a visible reminder to take their safety personally all the time. Topical areas to note planned improvements included 1) home, 2) work, 3) walking, and 4) wellness.

  Another site launched an Employee Self-Care website in April 2020 to help everyone in the community stay healthy, safe, and well-balanced, both during the COVID-19 outbreak and beyond. The website continues to be a one-stop-shop for employee self-care, encapsulating the eight dimensions of wellness: physical, emotional, financial, intellectual, spiritual, occupational, environmental, and social. The Employee Self-Care website included multiple teleworking and well-being resources including those addressing wellness centers and physical activity, nutrition and healthy eating, mental health, safety-at-home, substance use awareness/support, and weekly well-being tips from in-house occupational health services. The page was initially intended as a resource specifically to help employees through the current health crisis but is currently a living page that is growing and changing as webinars, online classes, and other materials are added.

  For some work locations, occupational health and wellness staff were among the first employees who began to work remotely. Up until that time, nearly all health and wellness clinical and worksite services were provided in person, and at the front end of the pandemic, health and wellness service utilization dropped starting in April 2020 due to the cancellation of in-person services. Yet the occupational health and wellness staff at many sites set out to reformat existing services and develop new ones to meet the employee needs. Using a variety of available technologies, such as Microsoft Teams, prerecorded Microsoft PowerPoint presentations, and YouTube, multiple virtual options were offered including Lunch & Learn talks, individual and group health coaching, nicotine dependence assistance, preventive exercise and conditioning, site-wide virtual health fairs, and topical safety presentations. Some sites offered weekly blog posts to distribute wellness information.

- *Strategies for Telehealth*
  Telehealth has advanced dramatically due to demand for such options during the pandemic. Overall, the efforts have led to a successful increase in service utilization, specifically for telehealth

coaching, telehealth intervention services, and web-based health education. Access to the Employee Assistance Program (EAP) was also promoted through virtual means. The use of virtual platforms to deliver health and wellness services has ensured the safety of the workforce by maintaining social distancing and has engaged participants of health and wellness services in preventive health behaviors that are evidenced to improve overall physical and emotional health and wellbeing.

Some sites provide a virtual medical platform that allows employees to visit a doctor, pediatrician, licensed therapist, psychiatrist or dermatologist by mobile app, video, or phone. Physicians are available for over 50 non-emergency medical conditions: allergies, headaches, cold and flu, fever, nausea, insect bites, ear infections, and more. The program's licensed therapists can help with anxiety, depression, bipolar disorder, stress management, grief and loss, Lesbian, Bisexual, Gay, Transgender (LBGT) support, trauma, and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), relationship issues, panic disorders, addictions, men's issues, women's issues, parenting issues, life changes, and more. One site reported that utilization of this virtual medical service platform resulted in an estimated $86,500 in cost avoidance by providing services early in the onset of the medical issue, prior to when higher levels of care would be needed.

One site partnered with a patient-centered digital clinic that treats chronic musculoskeletal conditions such as back and joint pain by providing employees a tablet and wearable sensors to complete physical therapy from their home to improve outcomes. Approximately 700 participants who used the program reported a 52% pain reduction in the first year of utilization. The clinic estimated a 47% decrease in surgery likelihood for participants.

- *Strategies to Maintain and Strengthen a Culture for Inclusiveness and Camaraderie*
  At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic when employees were sent home and separated physically from their colleagues, they not only lost their commute but also their support system and the social interaction that comes from a shared workspace. Sites attempted to counter that loss in a variety of creative ways. Some work groups catered to those with a competitive nature, offering virtual scavenger hunts, photo contests, and haiku-writing competitions. When work teams excelled, leadership gave gift certificates to local restaurants and food shops that offered pick-up or delivery. The added bonus to such giveaways was that it supported local businesses that were hurting from the pandemic's impact. Work groups took to 'hosting' small group virtual lunches together to check in with each other and disconnect from work. Some sites created forums for remote office employees to connect with fellow telecommuters.

Leadership, employees, and health and wellness staff found that these new innovative strategies for strengthening the workforce mental and physical well-being fostered employee engagement and increased access to the health and wellness staff as well as those wellness tools to support remote teleworking. These innovative strategies support the DOE G 450.4-1C Attachment 10 Attributes **Leadership:** *Demonstrated safety leadership and Risk-informed, conservative decision making*; **Employee Engagement**: *Personal commitment to everyone's safety, Teamwork and mutual respect, Mindful of hazards and controls, and Participation in work planning and improvement; and **Organizational Learning:** Credibility, trust and reporting errors and problems, Effective resolution of reported problems, Performance monitoring through multiple means, Questioning attitude, and Use of operational experience.*

Performance Monitoring for Assessing Success

The value of data to verify and further improve operational performance did not lessen throughout the transition to a more pronounced virtual work posture.

- *Data Monitoring to Reduce Injury*
Various sites used data to assess success of teleworking practices and programs and injury reduction during home office transitions. Computer-based tools monitored ergonomic parameters during employee computer usage throughout the workday. Some of these parameters included but were not limited to the number of mouse and keyboard clicks, wrist deviation during mouse use, and time spent using the keyboard or mouse without a break. Various risk profile data reports are generated from these computer-based tools, as well as real-time feedback to the employees to encourage them to take ergonomic breaks, stretch, or to make adjustments and corrections in posture and usage to prevent repetitive strain injuries.

- *Data to Improve the Teleworking Experience*
Other data was collected to improve the teleworking experience. One site reported conducting a targeted survey a month after their teleworking stance began during the pandemic to evaluate the experience of personnel who had transitioned to telework. The survey questions ranged from communications on expectations to infrastructure and IT support. The survey was structured with both a Likert (positive to negative) scale and a comments field at the end of the survey. The survey results were shared with management, human resources, and employees such that improvements could be made. The value of the survey was that it provided specific insight on challenges ranging from technical issues (e.g., challenges using certain software through a virtual connection) to flow down of communication and expectations. The feedback provided specific information to the organization's leadership on whether or how managers were flowing down expectations, communicating the need for implementing additional expectations (e.g., accountability mechanism for teleworkers outside of established accountability mechanisms, such as beginning and end of shift emails to managers) and responding to worker reception of the telework arrangement (perceived benefits of teleworking versus dislike of teleworking). Other sites reported quarterly check-ins to gather similar information, and others conducted supervisor- or manager-facilitated employee feedback sessions, which were then reviewed for commonality and trends. These overall common views or suggestions from employees were then presented to the employee Safety Leadership Teams for further input and prioritization, offering a full circle feedback loop to improve messaging and telework program offerings.

- *Data for Communication Improvements*
Sometimes data was used to enhance and test the effectiveness of information sharing approaches. Information such as meeting attendance lists, Q&A responses in online chat discussions, and post-meeting surveys helped the organization identify which communication mechanisms were most effective.

- *Data to Assist with Accountability and Time Charging*
Accountability of personnel in the remote office world is one area that managers expressed concern. Some worksites provided coaching to employees on the importance of time charging and accounting of activities. One site developed and disseminated a time charging refresher webinar to the workforce to remind employees of the importance of ethically and accurately recording time. Other sites recommended or required regular accounting of activities to their management, such as emails listing off work planned, and work completed each week.

- *Data to Garner Voluntary Protection Program Feedback*

One site transitioned its Voluntary Protection Program (VPP) Annual Assessment from in-person interviews to an electronic survey format to obtain worker feedback about the five VPP elements. Over 541 personnel contributed to the survey, resulting in a sizable data pool for analysis.

- *Data Collection and Analysis Pertaining to Reportable Events*
One area where data is plentiful is the causal analysis of reportable events. With the movement to a more virtual posture, sites had to become more tech savvy and virtually oriented in their causal analysis approach. One site reported a robust web-based approach to causal analysis that continues today despite the introduction of staff back to campus. This approach streamlined efficiencies (no travel time to on-site conference room; no need to find and reserve space adequate to fit all involved participants) and offered opportunity for introduction of new tools like virtual white boards to promote improved information sharing and consensus building.

Leadership and employees found that these new innovative strategies and tools for performance monitoring supported the sites' successful migration to teleworking and provided a documented feedback mechanism to strengthen those areas identified as needing improvement. These innovative strategies support the DOE G 450.4-1C Attachment 10 Attributes **Leadership:** *Demonstrated safety leadership, Risk-informed, conservative decision making, and Clear expectations and accountability*; **Employee Engagement**: *Personal commitment to everyone's safety, Teamwork and mutual respect, Mindful of hazards and controls, and Participation in work planning and improvement; and* **Organizational Learning:** *Credibility, trust and reporting errors and problems, Effective resolution of reported problems, Performance monitoring through multiple means, Questioning attitude, and Use of operational experience.*

CONCLUSIONS

Information gathered here offers insights, lessons learned, and best practices for sustaining or maintaining an effective safety culture which can be used to guide future teleworking environments and virtual work processes within the DOE and DOE-contractor community. Broad learnings from this white paper are summarized below:

- Multiple technologies, tools, and communication strategies were implemented to effectively maintain or sustain a healthy safety culture for virtual success;
- DOE sites enacted effective pandemic-directed changes to support a successful safety culture during teleworking and virtual work practices;
- Sites' innovative use of websites, Webex, and other telecommunication tools like Microsoft Teams further supported an effective safety culture by increasing communication and fostering more employee engagement with the workplace, work processes, and hazard mitigations during teleworking and virtual work practices;
- Multiple sites placed significant focus on wellness resiliency and telehealth options to further achieve an effective safety culture;
- Several sites sustained a successful safety culture by developing tools to create an inclusive and respectful workplace while operating in the virtual realm;
- The value of data to verify and further improve operational performance did not lessen throughout the transition to a more pronounced virtual work posture and provided a feedback mechanism to monitor the positive or negative trends in the safety culture;
- New methods to assess virtual workstation supported a positive safety culture by fostering employee engagement and interactions with the health and safety staff as well as the tools to support a proper remote office setup; and

- Teleworking offers unique opportunities to reduce strain on office and parking limitations some sites face, offer opportunities to enhance personnel work-life balance, and expand the reach and scope of worker engagement, including application of safety observations at home and in the community.

Due to the nature of this document, no specific practices were attributed to individual sites; for more specific examples, organizations are encouraged to:

- Review contents of the "Meetings" folder of the EFCOG Safety Culture Task Team webpage.
- Contact the document 'Contributors' listed in the SUMMARY section.

REFERENCE

G 450.4-1C, Integrated Safety Management System Guide, Attachment 10